

ON "SOUTHERN LITERATURE"

BY JAY B. HUBBELL

In the correct sense of the words, there has never been a Southern literature. This, of course, is far from saying that Southerners have not written books of genuine literary merit. Until the Civil War gave the Southern states their feeling of political and social solidarity, the Southerner thought of himself as an American rather than as a native of the South. Always and above all, however, he thought of himself as a Virginian, a South Carolinian, or a Georgian. "My native land," wrote Alexander H. Stephens, "my country, the only one that is country to me, is Georgia. The winds that sweep over her hills are my native air. There, I wish to live, and there to die." This quite obvious fact concerning the ante-bellum South has been strangely overlooked by Southern literary historians, who, if they were logical, would write not of the literature of the South, but of the literatures of Georgia, South Carolina, and Virginia. The ante-bellum novelist or poet wrote to glorify not the whole South but his native state. Although Simms was by no means destitute of national pride, he wrote primarily to do for South Carolina what Scott had done for Britain and Cooper for New York. Caruthers, Beverley Tucker, and John Esten Cooke were first of all Virginians. They were so intensely Virginian that had they been forbidden to write about Virginia, they would probably never have written a line. The apparently complete absence of literary histories of the South before 1861 indicates that there was then little demand for a "Southern literature." Helper's *Impending Crisis of the South* (1857) shows that the South was just beginning to develop that sectional consciousness, ultimately fired to white heat by the Civil War, which calls for a sectional literature. There is also the delightful but probably apocryphal tradition that in ante-bellum days some learned

Charleston society, noting that the South lacked a distinctive literature of its own, passed a resolution requesting Mr. William Gilmore Simms to write one.

It was the overthrow of the Confederacy and the bitterness of Reconstruction that created the posthumous demand for a Confederate literature—Confederate is a more accurate term than Southern. The old loyalty to the state had been largely replaced by a devotion to the Lost Cause. Having been vanquished by the sword, the South had only the pen left with which to justify herself to her children and to the world. The war was hardly over when a Confederate chaplain from Mississippi wrote, in the preface to his novel, *The Confederate Spy*: "The South must have a literature of her own. If we could not gain our *political*, let us establish at least our *mental* independence." This is the motive which inspired sons and daughters of the planters who had neglected Poe and Simms to collect war poems, to publish their memoirs, and to write the first literary histories of the South. The ultimate result was a Southern cult of the past, which, however, produced almost nothing of literary value until a younger generation, which was American rather than Southern, came to maturity.

The motive which produced the earliest histories of Southern literature was the same devotion to the Lost Cause which produced the demand for a "Southern literature." Feeling itself now a peculiar people, the South clamored for a literature of its own in much the same way that, after the Revolution, Americans demanded a national literature. In each case a literature was needed in order to refute charges of cultural inferiority preferred against a civilization. Northerners who were, as Lowell points out, proud of a culture derived from slave-holding Rome and Athens, looked down upon Southerners as belonging to an inferior branch of the race. There was, beyond question, a disposition on the part of Northern critics to maintain that no possible good could come out of the Nazareth of slavery. No wonder the South felt the need of a literature of her own and welcomed literary

historians who could demonstrate her claim to a native literature of high quality. Logically, one would expect the literary histories of the South to appear after the significant work of post-bellum writers had been done; but, on the contrary, the first, Davidson's *Living Writers of the South*, appeared in 1869, before Page and his contemporaries had begun to write. The South could not wait for her literature to be written; she must show that she had one already.

From the time of the formation of the Confederacy until the close of Reconstruction, the South, it may be admitted, had the unity of thought and feeling characteristic of a subjugated nation like Poland. It is a noteworthy fact, however, that this period is probably the most barren in the literary history of the South. The classics of later Southern fiction hardly begin to appear until the renaissance of national feeling following the close of Reconstruction. The poems which were occasioned by the Civil War we might class as distinctively Southern but for the fact that the war was by no means an experience peculiar to the South. Aside from partisan feeling, there is no essential difference in the way in which the war is reflected in Northern and in Southern poetry and fiction, whether written during the war or long after.

The earlier historians found the materials for a history of Southern literature so scanty that it became necessary to include every Southerner who had written a book of any kind or even contributed to the newspapers an occasional poem dedicated to the Lost Cause. There was little discrimination between *belles-lettres* and other forms of printed matter; everything was grist to the historian's mill. There was no sense of proportion, no standard of greatness; all loyal Southern authors were great writers, and all others were worthless. There could be no real understanding of Southern writers on the part of a literary historian writing in such a mood as this. His conception of his subject prevented him from paying any attention to national or international literary influences. The Southern people, so his logic ran, were a pecu-

liar people; hence their literature must be utterly different from that of the hated North; and it was, therefore, idle to attempt to throw light upon it by a study of American literature as a whole. In some cases, unfortunately, there was almost a positive contempt for sound scholarship—that, too, was Northern. As a result of all this, the student of today finds the writings of ante-bellum Southerners buried under a mass of patriotic rubbish, a great obstacle to serious investigation.

As time passed, better trained and less hysterical writers took the place of earlier historians like Miss Louise Manley, who cherished a lofty disdain for accuracy and impartial criticism. A calmer tone prevailed, but the provincial bias continued. It was long before it occurred to any one that the proper thing to do was to reprint selections with the necessary apparatus for study. Professor William P. Trent's scholarly *Southern Writers* (1905) was the earliest, and is still the best, of such anthologies. Indeed, of the many who have written upon "Southern literature," Professor Trent and Professor Mims are almost the only writers who have escaped the provincial bias. The reception of Trent's admirable life of Simms, published in 1892, proved that at that time there was no real freedom of speech permitted to the trained historian who wished to tell the whole truth about Southern life and literature. As late as 1902, Professor William E. Dodd, then teaching in Virginia, wrote in the *New York Nation*: "Public opinion positively demands that teachers of history, both in the colleges and in the high schools, shall subscribe unreservedly to two trite oaths: (1) that the South was altogether right in seceding from the Union in 1861; and (2) that the war was not waged about the negro." The later literary historians, especially Mr. Moses, have been much more scholarly and less provincial in spirit; but all are limited by their illusion that there is such a thing as a separate literature in the South distinct from that of the rest of the country.

All the historians have avoided answering one elementary

but fundamental question: What constitutes a Southern writer? None of them seem to have any criterion. They claim writers who were born in the North but lived and wrote in the South; they claim writers who were born in the South but lived and wrote in the North; and they disown alike Northerners and Southerners who were not loyal to Southern traditions. In this particular, the most ambitious of all Southern literary histories, the fifteen-volume *Library of Southern Literature*, is least pardonable, for it was prepared by the best trained men in the South. In the opinion of the Southern literary historian, there is something magical about the Southern soil that makes whoever touches it, other than a carpetbagger like Tourgée, a Southerner in sympathies and ideals forever after. To deny this involves the destruction of the whole defence of a sectional literature or a sectional literary history.

The failure of the literary historian of the South to understand his subject completely is due to his ignoring its relation to the rest of American literature. Let us take the case of the ante-bellum writers who, though little read, have been vastly overpraised in the South and somewhat underrated, or at least little understood, in the North. These writers differ little from their Northern contemporaries because in neither section was there any vital connection between life and literature; but the minor differences which one does find are significant because they are due to economic and social differences between the South and the North. His inability to discuss frankly the question of slavery has prevented the Southern literary historian from pointing out the real differences between Northern and Southern writers. Slavery made the South conservative and consequently more archaic in its literary ideals. It caused the Southern novelist to neglect the unique social life which he knew best in order to write about the legendary past, for it was not safe to discuss the present. Opposition to slavery roused the South to fury and produced a certain bombastic, almost hysterical tone in Southern writers.

Slavery caused the South to dislike the novels of Dickens and nearly all else that was democratic in literature. Slavery also made literature the business of amateurs rather than of professionals.

In discussing the New South, our literary historians have neglected to note the extraordinary discrepancy between the ideal and the real life of the South during the eighties and the nineties. Economically the nation was a unit as it had never before been. In consequence, the two sections were every day becoming more and more alike, for with the disappearance of slavery the whole basis of the old Southern life and character was gone. Almost without suspecting it, the South had been Americanized. The New South was industrial and democratic, but it admired the feudal and aristocratic qualities of the Old South. Though it had, in its actual life, forsaken almost all the old traditions, the New South, growing daily more wealthy by the practice of Northern business methods, idealized the old social order which it would have found utterly foreign could it have seen it restored.

The short stories and novels of Page, Craddock, Allen, Cable, and Harris belong to American rather than to "Southern" literature. They were produced by the same movement in literature which produced the New England stories of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Western stories of Bret Harte and Hamlin Garland. All these writers were primarily local colorists. There was never any essential difference between Northern and Southern literary tastes and ideals, even before the Civil War. It is absurd to class Thomas Nelson Page as exclusively a Southern writer. Like Simms and Poe, he was largely dependent for his popularity upon Northern publishers and readers. Though he is, of course, intensely loyal to the Old South, which he has done more than any one else to over-idealize, the literary movement which produced him had little to do with the South. He was influenced far more by his Northern and Western contemporaries than by his ante-bellum predecessors, Caruthers,

Cooke, and Simms. The later Southern writers at their best possess a naturalness, a sincerity which Southern writers of the slavery régime most conspicuously lacked. In short, by their practice they have demonstrated the truth of Harris's assertion that there can be no sectional literature which is not American as well.

The limitations of the sectional point of view are very clearly seen in the failure of literary historians to appreciate the significance of such recent writers as Ellen Glasgow. Since the publication of her *Voice of the People* in 1900, "Southern literature" has undergone what may justly be called a revolution. A marked change has come over practically all of the older Southern writers, and new writers have arisen who depart widely from all the old traditions in both life and literature. In 1907 Mrs. Corra Harris wrote: "A country or a section may change so suddenly in its character and ambitions that an author who once portrayed the life of it can do so no longer. . . . Now, something has happened in the South during the last ten years so radical and so overwhelming that what was true is now history, what was characteristic has become bombastic, and what were principles of living are mere sentimentalities connected with the *code duello* existence of the past."

Perhaps it was the War with Spain which caused the South to see the discrepancy between its real and its ideal life. This literary revolution, however, is only the tardy result of the social and economic revolution which took place soon after the Civil War. Miss Glasgow, the pioneer in this movement, was the first of the Virginian novelists to attain a genuinely national point of view. She was the first to treat the old soldiers not as demigods but as human beings. She was the first to escape the tyrannical spell of the past, and the first also to draw her heroes from the despised "po' white trash." Her example has affected other writers. Miss Mary Johnston abandoned her melodramatic romances of Colonial Virginia, and in *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing* she described the Civil

War in a manner suggestive of Tolstoi rather than of Page. Finally in *Hagar* she attacked the traditional Southern ideals of her sex. Even Page, after the comparative failure of *Gordon Keith* in 1903, wrote in *John Marvel, Assistant* a problem novel which bears far greater resemblance to Churchill's *Inside of the Cup* than to his own *In Ole Virginia*. Younger writers, like Henry Sydnor Harrison, interested in the problems of present-day America and indifferent or hostile to old ideals, are continuing the process of making "Southern literature" genuinely American.

Southern novelists have been almost a generation ahead of the literary historians, for while "Southern literature" was undergoing the transformation just described, Southern literary histories appeared as regularly as ever. The later histories have, as a rule, been more scholarly and less provincial; and the proportion of anthologies has increased. But there is nowhere any recognition of the fact that Southern writers cannot be adequately appraised when studied without regard to the literature of the nation as a whole. The recent war seems to have ended for the time being the output of literary histories of the South although it has not put an end to the appearance of Southern anthologies. Let us hope there will be no more of either unless they are prepared in a different spirit. Surely the South may now safely entrust the reputation of her men of letters to the American literary historian of the future, no matter what his place of birth.

Would it be presumptuous to suggest to the student of Southern literary history that a much less objectionable method would be to make a study of the South as a literary background? A study of Southern life as reflected in novels, poems, plays, and travel literature would necessarily omit those Southern writers who have nothing to tell us about Southern life; but it would include all Southerners, like Simms, Cooke, Page, and Harris, who have attempted to portray the life of their section. Such a study would bring together all that is significant which has been written about the

South. Such books as Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Fanny Kemble's *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation*, Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand*, Defoe's *Colonel Jacque*, Thackeray's *The Virginians*, and A. G. Bradley's *Sketches from Old Virginia* ought not to be ignored in any literary study of the South. We Southerners have too consistently ignored all that outsiders have written about us. In particular, we have failed to see that the most accurate accounts of the unique life of the Old South come not from the idealized reminiscences of Page, but rather from the descriptions of visitors from the outside like Bradley, Paulding, G. P. R. James, and George Cary Eggleston.